World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

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United Nations

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Walter Pfaeffle, Kuwait News Agency

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UN MAP COLLECTION

Maps are a means of organizing information. They predate writing. The search of knowledge and the urge to explore motivated humankind to depict our environment. The fear of being lost stretches back to our earliest times. The United Nation's Cartographic Section has been producing maps since the inception of the world organization. Its collection holds many thousands of maps, atlases, gazetteers, travel guides, cartographic and geographic reference works and digital cartographic products. In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Miklos Pinther, the UN's Chief Cartographer, discusses the history and the current work of the Organization's Cartographic Section.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

WILLIAMS: Hello, I'm Ian Williams, sitting in for Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The United Nations map collection is located in the Dag Hammarskjold Library at the UN Headquarters in New York and houses over 80,000 maps. The collection is geographically comprehensive and includes thematic topics such as climate, communications, economics, energy, geology, politics, population and transportation. Among the various reference works in the collection are a number of publications on international boundaries, including those published by the International Boundary Research Unit. The collection also maintains up-to-date information on flag specifications and national anthems.

To talk about the work of the Cartographic Section of the United Nations, we have Miklos Pinther, United Nations' Chief Cartographer. Joining me to talk with Mr. Pinther is Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times* and Walter Pfaeffle of *Kuwait News Agency*.

Mr. Pinther, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

PINTHER: Thank you very much.

WILLIAMS: United Nations is supposed to ease problems around the world and it seems to many of us that maps are the cause of the problems in many parts of the world. There are many boundary disputes where wars have started because maps have been published with disputed boundaries. I think of the Sino-Indian border war, for example, which followed the discovery that the Chinese had drawn a road across their own map which was not on the Indian maps. Do you have any part in this or do you have to accept what the countries say for their boundaries?

PINTHER: Well, essentially, an honest map is a proper depiction of the situation on the surface of the earth. You know, for a long time -- and maybe I should put this back up -- in our office we had a sign that said, "blessed are the cartographers, for they draw nations together". And I think it's a rather nice statement actually because we do try very hard, particularly at the UN. It's a very special assignment in order to depict properly all the member states' concerns.

WILLIAMS: You started out from very humble beginnings. I gather your first map

was how to get to the first Headquarters in Lake Success out in Long Island from the Waldorf Astoria I note, which is where the delegates presumably stayed in those days.

PINTHER: That's right. I think our Unit is one of the oldest ones in the Organization at the Secretariat and I think there was a map number four. And those were the days when the Headquarters were located in Forest Hills.

WILLIAMS: Did anyone get lost following this map?

PINTHER: I don't know. Unfortunately, I did not start at that time so I was not there to be blamed.

PISIK: You know, I've been thinking that the United Nations has no land so you rely on member states for the core data that you use to make the different kinds of maps. How do you get your information and how reliable is it? Again, getting back to the question of there's nothing more political than a boundary.

PINTHER: We periodically send out a reminder to member states to deposit maps prepared by their national mapping agencies with our map collection and our map collection is one of our primary sources for the maps that we prepare here. So in undertaking any map that we do of any member states' territory or a region, we consult these maps.

PISIK: So you would be able to find the Chinese Embassy in downtown Belgrade?

PINTHER: Well, not really, because actually the answer is that we usually don't get into preparing maps at very large scales. Most of our work tends to be at the what is called "medium-scale level" and tends to show thematic – distribution of diseases, distribution of peace-keeping operations that sort of thing, and really just helpful for our colleagues in various departments to understand what goes on in the particular area that they are covering.

PFAEFFLE: To come back to this question, do you actually draft map of cities like Belgrade and how often do you update maps?

PINTHER: We don't draw maps at city scale unless there was a special reason for it. An example of this would be, for instance, Mogadishu where the UN had a specific deployment there and it was necessary to show the extent of the deployed area. But otherwise, we don't prepare city maps and even really for large topographic maps, we rely on member states to produce those and provide us for our use.

PFAEFFLE: How quickly can you react to political changes?

PINTHER: Well, map making is a time-consuming job even in this modern computer age. It takes a while to even clip out digital files from the data base but we are getting faster and we have been making maps, and actually producing maps, from the same digital file for many different purposes. An example would be the map of Tajikistan that we have done for the peace-keeping deployment in that area. We prepare the basic map of the country and we use a version of this which appears in the Secretary-General's Report which shows the peace-keeping operation and its deployment. And then we use, without that information, just as a reference country profile map, for briefing purposes and it may appear in a illustration in a small report or book. So we manage the same digital file very quickly, which in the past we couldn't do. We would have to cut and paste and join with pen and ink or whatever it was done. And that actually helped us. This technological advance really helped us to maintain a very small staff here over a long period of time without any addition to our staff to cope with the expanding demand on our services.

WILLIAMS: As well as your maps you also have a collection of presumably 185 flags and a 185 national anthems, how are these kept? Are there pictures, descriptions?

PINTHER: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Is there sheet music or do you know how to hum 185 national anthems?

PINTHER: I don't. Our map curator is the person who keeps this information. The specifications for the flags come from member states and these are kept in strict order. Same as the national anthems and some, of course, national anthems are accompanied by musical notes and any staff member is welcome come to check this is. But one of the services we provide, you know, the UN uses a lot of flags outside of Headquarters and at various duty stations and every time a flag is manufactured, the specifications are given from the map collection.

PISIK: I'm wondering in terms of technology – the map room here at Dag Hammarskjold is terrific but I'm wondering is there any way for the public to access that? Will you be putting this out on the Web, a way for people to follow their refugee migrations or climate changes or other peace-keeping issues?

PINTHER: Yes, the Library's access – the map collection is part of the Library and it is accessed as the Library would be accessed, so it is rather limited. Now, what we

have done recently is to develop an Intranet site. On this site we have the maps that we have produced in the Cartographic Section, not necessarily those that are housed in the Map Collection because the map collection is a standard map library. Maybe, eventually, member states can submit their maps in digital format which we can put up on the Intranet. But right now we have all the maps that we have produced in the last two or three years which would include a complete set of the peace-keeping operation maps and some of the regional maps that we are asked to do. And these will be available probably within a very, very short time on the Intranet for the general public to access. And we have queries and other forums so that we can interact with the general public much more than what we have done in the past.

PFAEFFLE: Mr. Pinther, after the Gulf War you were quite involved in drawing up a new boundary between Kuwait and Iraq. Could you describe a little bit what happened and then there must have been a lot of pressure from both sides as to how that map should look like.

PINTHER: Yes. The boundary demarcation, the common boundary between Iraq and Kuwait, was undertaken subsequent to the Gulf War and at the request of the Security Council. And it's perhaps important to point out that in boundary-making there is generally – it's a two-step operation. You have to have the limitation which describes where the boundary should be and there should be an agreement between the joining states on this delimitation. The delimitation can be a simple statement, it can be a complicated statement with geographical coordinates, but demarcation pre-supposes that delimitation exists, member states have agreed on this and what is the task is to interpret those delimitations and mark the boundary on the ground. So what we did was demarcation. Delimitation existed in an exchange of formal letters in 1932 which were re-confirmed in 1964 in Baghdad and we were not there to delimit the boundary, we were there to demarcate it . So it was essentially a technical operation where we brought in surveyors, we did new aerial photography to make sure that we had the up-to-date modern methods of preparing these maps. I think it was the first international boundary fully surveyed with GPS equipment, global positioning satellite equipment, and extremely highly accurately positioned boundary pillars within one-and-a-half centimetre accuracy to the geographical coordinates. And that's what we did. And the mapping that was produced from this which actually illustrates where this boundary is on the land was of

course something special and ancillary really to the demarcation.

PFAEFFLE: Did both sides agree to this demarcation?

PINTHER: Yes, both sides have agreed to it now.

PFAEFFLE: But usually it's unusual for the UN to draw a demarcation line -- usually, this is a political decision that is made in bilateral negotiations.

PINTHER: That's correct. It's very unusual. This is the first time that the UN has actually demarcated an international boundary and the formula, I think, that was adopted was a very successful one. And one thing that I could point out is that the UN has means to receive support from many member states and several member states have provided support for the demarcation effort by providing some of the world's best professionals to do this work. So in a sense, particularly for countries which don't have wherewithals to do such a highly technical exercise, it may be considered to be a good project to do.

WILLIAMS: Along with the boundaries and along with the flags and the anthems one of the other big causes of dispute is the names of the countries. How do you decide whether the country is Cote-d'Ivoire, Ivory Coast, Myanmar, Burma, Zaire, Congo? Whose decision is this? Do you make the decision or do you leave it for the government and delegation concerned?

PINTHER: We leave it for the governments to tell us how they would like to have their name shown on our maps and listed. So the Cote d'Ivoire is a good example of that. We changed this some years ago from Ivory Coast so in all languages it's Cote d'Ivoire. But there is a group of experts on geographic names, a UN group of experts on geographic names, and we generally try to follow the resolutions that they pass. And the tendency has been, in recent years, is to limit the so-called ex-names or conventional forms and use as much as possible the native form or the native orthography and spelling of a name.

WILLIAMS: There's one -- I can't resist this -- but you did say the UN did not have any land. You do have the Headquarters territory.

PINTHER: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And I'd like to hear about the other one it's that -- as I remember the UN Treaty on Outer Space says the moon is the common heritage of all mankind. Do you do the road maps for the moon as well?

PINTHER: Not yet. We would love to go to the moon. We travelled to Mt.

Everest, I would love to go to the moon.

PISIK: I just wanted to follow up on Ian's point. At the bottom of every map I have taken in the Library, there's a disclaimer at the bottom that says: "the boundaries and names shown in the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations." Isn't that just a little bit weaselly?

PINTHER: No. I think it's common practice by many member states to add a disclaimer even on maps produced, let's say, in a foreign ministry of a member state. So you find it on, let's say, United States maps.

WILLIAMS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Miklos Pinther, United Nations Chief Cartographer. Betsy, do you have something else?

PISIK: Yes, just to finish up on that point. You're talking about making the new boundary between Kuwait and Iraq, I'm wondering Ethiopia and Eritrea. That's been described as a war that could have been averted for the lack of a map. Are there any plans to get involved there?

PINTHER: We have been making some first steps toward a contingency plan because the Cartographic Section was asked and named in the framework agreement of the Organization of African Unity. But we really have to wait until the hostilities stop.

PISIK: You mean you can't send anybody down there to ...

PINTHER: No. And really you have to have the agreement of both member states in order for us to be involved.

PFAEFFLE: I noticed in the literature that we were given before that you even drew up a map of the Great Lake Indians, how did you that?

PINTHER: That was in my employment prior to the UN but I would love to talk about that. But it was essentially a thematic atlas that was produced at the Newbury Library in Chicago by a distinguished group of historians and ethno-historians and it was published by the Oklahoma University Press. It's actually quite an interesting model study to see what was the history of land ownership and distribution of an ethnic population.

WILLIAMS: But when you began drawing maps, you said earlier that you were used to pen and paper. But I remember one of – we're talking about disputes and good friends is not making good neighbours again . And if I remember rightly, the Israeli-Egyptian negotiations were stalled for quite a long time about the thickness of a pencil on the map that included, according to the Israelis, the town of Taba in Egypt and of course

according to the Egyptians said, "no, no it's the other end of the pencil mark that marked the boundary." Do you have many like this and how closely refined are you now with computer technology? You mentioned the centimetre-and-a-half before as opposed to a mile long -- something of a difference.

PINTHER: I think that one of the progresses in cartography has been the introduction and tremendous accuracy in the Lancer way and then how that Lancer data is transferred into mapping, but it doesn't mean that errors are not being made. Errors are being made by more sophisticated equipment today but we always have to question the database. I think good cartographers as they question the source of material that they use to compile their maps, we have to question the data source, the digital data sources, that we have. I think it's a common perception that once it's in digital form it's absolutely the last word and this is not so. But these things happen and international boundaries are sometimes misrepresented and sometimes misrepresentation happens at the negotiation table -- negotiation tables on the ground and so forth. But if you allow me to say one more quote. There is a famous geographer at the beginning of this century before the United Nations or even the League of Nations was founded, who said that "maps speak across the barrier of language". And I hope that's really true because I think that although our maps are -- You know we try to produce our maps in the official languages of the UN; it's really not necessary in a way. You could find your way, and so forth, on a map, particularly if it's well done.

PISIK: Does the UN have a particular projection? I keep thinking about the maps that I think are on the walls or on the globes and they all seem to be distorted in some way especially with your global positioning and GIS. Is there a way to overcome the distortion of different projections or is this not much of an issue.

PINTHER: Well, actually it's a mathematical problem and it's a mathematical impossibility to take a spherical object and unravel it so that it has no shape and no aerial distortions. In other words, you cannot have a map which maintains equal areas. As we say, there is a proper proportion between the various areas, the various sizes of countries and a map that does not distort the shape at the same time. So what we try to do is we try to pick a particular map projection that matches the thematic subject. So if you were a demographer, and like our colleagues in the Statistical Office of the Population Division, if you're mapping population data that has to do with a relationship, the population density

has to do with the relationship of the aerial extent and the number of people who live there. So in those cases you would select an equal area map. For general purposes, we select the projections which are called compromise map projections which is a little bit of each, but not wholly.

PFAEFFLE: So then, what is the UN policy on Palestine? Have you already drawn a map of the State of Palestine?

PINTHER: No yet.

PFAEFFLE: Will you?

PINTHER: I guess if Palestine becomes independent or reaches statehood, as with other member states, we would prepare a map for Palestine.

WILLIAMS: You don't have the originals from the time of the Green-line demarcation?

PINTHER: We have several maps -- the partition of the Palestine maps from the late 1940's and others -- but, you know, things have changed and so we have to wait until these changes reach a maturity.

WILLIAMS: Are any of these old maps collectors' items yet or are they being stolen and sold at Sotheby's?

PINTHER: Not to that extent but some maps that were prepared some time ago, like the partition of Palestine map, there very limited copies available. Who knows? They may become collector's items but we are generally -- it's a modern organization and it's modern cartography that we practice so we generally don't really have any antique maps or any maps with major areas that one could consider like in a stamp as a lucky find, you know.

WILLIAMS: Of course, the UN is devoted to sort of geographical equality between all nations and we have gotten into this prejudice of always having the north on the top because the British and French and the Dutch who made most of the maps that's where they were. I think the Chinese used to do them east to south, east to west. Other people have suggested the other way around. Is that fixed or you're going to change it at some point?

PINTHER: Well, you know in map-making, the imagination is your limit but actually the thing is that -- and I often ask this question: an interesting fact that we sometimes forget is that four fifths of the world's population live on the northern

hemisphere and so almost three-quarters of the land masses or may be more are in the northern hemisphere. So that maybe accounts for the fact that why the earlier maps were – well, really mapping sort of began as far as we can tell in the Mesopotamian area and in the northern areas and a lot of our earlier traditions in cartography we think are Greek and Arabic astrologers and geographers.

PISIK: How closely do you work with the different agencies, funds and programmes? Do you all work off the same sets of maps that you tweak for different purposes or sort of develop their own map and then come to you with it?

PINTHER: We do provide some assistance particularly advisory assistance to the separate agencies, regional economic commissions' offices, and so forth, but this question of cooperation actually is something that in the last five or six years has been on my mind because with digital mapping it is becoming possible to very freely exchange the basic data on which thematic information can be compiled. So one of the concepts I have been working on is to develop a standard UN digital database that could be finished by the various departments and the specialized agencies. I think that is a very cost-effective measure. I think we can introduce an efficient data exchange and actually updating the so-called data engine which would then allow all our colleague to similar type of mapping.

PFAEFFLE: Mr. Pinther, in 1975 I think Indonesia took over East Timor. Now their map obviously looks different than the map that the UN would produce, how would you deal with a question like that -- Indonesia being a member of the United Nations -- and you will be stepping on their toes if you come up with a map that's different from theirs?

PINTHER: Yes. On our maps we have been showing East Timor as a separate entity and that's because we have a General Assembly resolution to do that. Most of our work reflects the decisions of the Security Council and the decisions of the General Assembly.

WILLIAMS: Now the interesting bit about mapping is we tend to think of it as the earth is permanent and in fact it isn't. We know that countries move, the shelf of the sea moves and especially river boundaries move and. especially since the Law of the Sea, now countries' sort of territorial boundaries extend 200 miles out into the ocean. How do you measures to determine where the high water mark is, where you measure the 200 miles from or what to do when a river boundary shifts? Does that mean the boundary shifts when the channel goes and that's the basis of a demarcation?

PINTHER: I think that this requires the best minds to come to some sort of a resolution for these problems but in case of the sea boundary, member states are asked to establish their baseline. Their baseline is short, straight-line segments that describe their coast and the distances measured out toward the continental shelf are measured from these baselines. So, some of these problems can be readily technically resolved. There are of course, with shifting rivers and others, I think that there must be some sort of compromise, some sort of negotiation, if there is another issue in that sense.

WILLIAMS: Are you in no way the arbiter for this? You don't decide that this boundary is fixed now?

PINTHER: No, we're not because essentially we have the International Court of Justice where Member States can bring their case to and the Court is there to help them.

WILLIAMS: Do you provide them the maps for this?

PINTHER: No. The Court actually has, on occasion, acquired the services of various cartographers to do the presentations and, of course, the submitting parties have their own cartographers and surveyors to produce their own submissions and evidence.

WILLIAMS: Do they have a sort of gladiatorial combat between them? Two teams of map-makers throwing pens until one wins?

PINTHER: Well, it could be and I think that some of these court cases really last years and that's probably because the arguments and pros and contras have to be weighed and it takes a lot to do that.

WILLIAMS: It does?

PINTHER: Yes, I think so.

WILLIAMS: Well, we're very grateful. It's a fascinating part of it. Mr. Pinther that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Miklos Pinther, United Nations Chief Cartographer. He was interviewed by Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times* and Walter Pfaeffle of the *Kuwait News Agency*. I'm Ian Williams sitting in for Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**